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Applying Theory into Practice: Logistical and Educational Issues in Mediating Instruction for Refugees

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Children are the innocent victims of political unrest. The most recent casualties include not only the children whose parents are fighting in the Persian Gulf, but also the young refugees from the Middle East who arrived to take sanctuary in the United States.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how educational theories of teaching language minority students relate to current practice when dealing with our nation's most recent wave of refugees, those from the Middle East. In particular,

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this discussion will focus on elementary school age children who arrived with their families in the United States from Kuwait in October, 1990 and have located in Raleigh, North Carolina¹.

Putting Theory Into Practice

Wake County (Raleigh, NC) Schools enroll 64,252 students in grades K-12 and cover nearly eight hundred square miles. Raleigh was selected as the final destination for Persian Gulf War refugee families with no relatives or other connections in the United States. The district is highly familiar with serving LEP students, but not since the end of the war in Vietnam have the schools and community had to act in concert so quickly to serve so many. Overnight, fifty families from Kuwait who needed food, shelter, and schooling for the children arrived in Raleigh.

The district reports that these are the first Arab ESL students on record, and that aside from cultural differences, the procedures for enrollment and instruction follow the same successful patterns and practices that the district uses for its other ESL students. What follows is a discussion of ESL theories of enrollment, mediation of instruction, and parental involvement that the Wake County School District put into practice to meet the needs of the refugee children from the Middle East.

Student Enrollment

Social Services of Wake County informed the school district in October 1990, of the arrival of fifty Kuwaiti school-aged refugee children. Social Services housed the families, and once the district's student placement officer received the housing location information, he set into motion the placement and mediation of instruction for the youngsters. The district created the position of student placement officer in 1987 with the assistance of grant monies. Wake County Schools enroll nearly 200 new, nonnative English speaking students per year, and the placement officer provides a direct link between the schools and the community, serving as the educational liaison to parents and government agencies. The placement officer assigns students to schools based on a variety of variables. Some examples are housing location, school enrollment figures, and student age and interests.²

Dale (1986) cites strategies for welcoming the newcomer in the school. He lists: (a) using interpreters, (b) providing teachers with demographic information

about the student, (c) assessing the student's skills in the native language, (d) assessing the student's English proficiency, (e) grouping LEP students for intensive classes in English, (f) conducting staff development about the students and their cultures, and (g) initiating a buddy system with the students. The school district has internalized the procedures synthesized by Dale (1986) for working with all newly arrived LEP students. For example, the district attempted to locate an Arabic translator but discovered that all the fathers spoke English well. School personnel made home visits to obtain information on the academic background of the children, discovering that thirty students would need elementary school placements. All of the school-age children were from five to eleven years old.

The district maintains four elementary campuses that render well-planned and articulated procedures for placing students in appropriate classrooms and developing instructional plans to serve the needs of the system's ESL students. Administrators created these processing centers since there are a total of fifty-four elementary schools in the 800 square-mile district. They determined this was the most efficient use of limited human and financial resources. Principals and elementary classroom teachers of these four elementary schools are experienced in dealing with LEP students. A number of immigrant children attend school in Wake County. Their parents may be affiliated with the area universities and international corporations, or they may be refugees or migrant workers.

Wake County Schools do not have an in-take center to assess the students' English language proficiency; the ESL teacher at each school performs the task once the student arrives. Two of the four elementary schools received the majority of the Arab children. The ESL teachers grouped the new students for intensive English classes lasting forty-five minutes daily. The students receive all other instruction from their classroom teacher. The district offers yearly inservice for classroom teachers to maintain and update skills needed for working with ESL students.

Mediation of Instruction

According to Tikunoff (1983), there are six ways of mediating effective instruction: (a) use of L_1 and L_2 , (b) integration of English-language development with basic skills instruction, (c) use of L_1 cultural information during instruction, (d) responding to and using L_1 cultural referents, (e) organizing instruction to build upon rules of discourse from the L_1 culture, and (f) observing values and

norms of the L_1 culture. These six steps provide a format that teachers can apply to help introduce LEP students into an unfamiliar classroom. For example, using both the native language and English assists the students, especially upon arrival, achieve comprehension of directions and subject content. Tikunoff's second step, integration of the English-language development with basic skills instruction, refers to the ESL teacher's use of English with instructional tasks so the student becomes competent in English.

Using information about the student's native culture during instruction affirms the importance of the learner as an individual. Additionally, knowledge and use of cultural referents by the teacher assists in building a familiar atmosphere conducive to learning for the student. Organizing instruction that builds on rules of discourse guides the student in learning behaviors appropriate in various contexts of our culture. Finally, in step six, Tikunoff advises that teachers observe values and norms of the L_1 culture. For example, in some cultures, children are accustomed to working cooperatively. The teacher who is able to incorporate these six steps will improve and enrich immigrant students' cultural and linguistic transitional experiences.

In the Wake County Schools, the ESL teachers shared practices they used successfully with the new Arab refugee children demonstrating the Tikunoff points. First, the teachers made use of two languages to mediate effective instruction. Since neither the ESL teachers nor the assistants spoke Arabic, the teachers used the fathers during the children's first day at school. The parents attended the orientation period, and the fathers used the L_1 to clarify issues for the children. The parents continue to act as an L_1 resource.

Classroom teachers in the elementary school use integration of English language development with basic skills instruction as suggested by Tikunoff to successfully mediate instruction. The classroom teachers know no Arabic, yet they are still able to integrate English language development while teaching the basic skills. The teachers resort to verbal and nonverbal cues given by the children that indicate a need for drill on a given English-language concept. The classroom teachers also deliver instruction through the use of concrete, visual examples that reinforce what the child is studying.

ESL and classroom teachers make ample use of L_1 cultural information during instruction. While the children were still in the silent period, the teachers encouraged them to draw pictures depicting scenes of life in their home culture. The children showed the drawings to the class. For their arrival, the teachers hung the Kuwaiti flag to welcome the students, and the teachers continue to seek realia and children's books from Kuwait.

Responding to and using L_1 cultural referents is another technique employed

by the school district to mediate instruction. One kindergarten student was accepting neither his female teacher nor his female principal as an authority figure. The male ESL coordinator for the district intervened by calling a conference with the father and child. Aware of the Arabic cultural referent of children being taught by someone of the same sex, the coordinator sensitively explained the situation to the father who then assisted his child in modifying his behavior to function within the majority culture.

The fifth method suggested by Tikunoff for successful instruction is to build upon rules of discourse from the L_1 culture. For example, the Wake County teachers integrated rules of discourse from the Arabic culture to enhance instruction. Since Arabic children are field dependent, cooperative learning activities and the buddy system worked well.

The final point Tikunoff cites is for the teacher to observe values and norms of the L_1 culture. When the Arabic children arrived, they would not eat the cafeteria food. The ESL teachers discovered that the children believed the food to be pork. The teachers worked with the parents to dispel the youngsters' fears and assure them that the cafeteria did on occasion serve hot dogs or other foods with pork, but that there would be other entree selections as well. As one ESL teacher commented, "they now eat the cafeteria food with real gusto!"

The regular elementary classroom teachers in Wake County employ all of the basic tenants of good ESL practice when working with the Arabic ESL students (Riddlemoser, 1987). For example, regular classroom teachers assign a peer or buddy to each child. The teachers speak simply and clearly to the students in short sentences. They respect the silent period, and when appropriate, encourage the students to use as much English as possible. The teachers employ concrete tasks in the classroom and use visual cues as often as possible. Above all, the teachers create a warm atmosphere with a smile or a nod of encouragement for the child.

Parental Involvement

All the children come from households where education is revered. During the initial interviews between families and school district personnel, all of the parents expressed a deep concern regarding their child's education and asked what they could do to assist. According to the ESL teachers, the children improve daily with English and all aspects of school. This would concur with research regarding parental involvement.

Epstein (1985) concluded that parental encouragement and involvement

positively influence student achievement, even after accounting for the students' ability and family socioeconomic status. The fathers are actively involved in their children's education, with most contacting the school at least once a week to inquire about their child's headway. Also confirmed are the works by Gillum (1977), Rich, et al. (1979) and Comer (1980) which showed parental involvement to positively affect school attendance, classroom behavior, and parent-teacher relations.

Additionally, all of the children are performing well in math, and the positive experience builds confidence for language learning as well. Hence, after three months in school, the students feel comfortable in cognitively undemanding and context embedded situations as well as cognitively demanding and context embedded ones in mathematics (Cummins, 1981).

And When We Think We Have Thought of It All....

Seasoned teachers from all fields in education have tales of unanticipated events or results. The ESL teachers of Raleigh are no different. One ESL teacher hung the Kuwaiti flag to welcome the children, and another teacher displayed a map of Kuwait. Once the children were able to communicate in English, they informed the teachers that they are not Kuwaiti, but rather Jordanian and Palestinian. Teachers continue to sort out these kinds of situations.

Conclusions

All teachers and administrators involved with the new Arab refugee children in Raleigh concurred that although each culture and child is unique, the theories and practices of ESL address the universal needs of LEP children. How school districts prepare and create plans for recent immigrants will determine how quickly and how well students are able to learn English and ultimately be independently successful. The Wake County School System developed a plan that includes open communication between the schools and community, as well as specialized campuses that provide needed services in times of limited resources. The district also works closely with the parents, using them as resources to assist in their children's education. Finally, the district applies second language teaching theory to practice, using techniques that facilitate learning for the nonnative English speaking child.

Efficient enrollment procedures, parental involvement, and mediation of instruction all demonstrate practices based on theory. These build the foundation to provide a welcoming atmosphere and avenues for a successful educational experience.³

Notes

¹Twenty other children and their families arrived on the same plane and were placed in an adjacent school district.

²The district has a variety of magnet schools that could be appropriate for some students.

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